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San Bernardino County Sun

Agencies give annual report card on what's in the water

Disclosure alerts customers to contaminants found in supply

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Saturday, December 21, 2002 - Do reports of polluted water have you nervous? Have you watched "Erin Brockovich," the movie about pollution in the High Desert, once too often?

Do you fret over what's coming out of your tap?

Finding out what's in your water is as easy as looking at the annual report card in your utility bill, or it can be accessible with a mouse click or a phone call to your utility.

Once a year, all municipal water suppliers are required to provide their customers with a report card, called a consumer confidence report, which discloses any contaminants found in the water.

Many utilities post the report on their Web sites, and copies are generally available on request.

"Our goal is to allow the lay person to know what's in the water they're drinking," said Bill Bryden, director of San Bernardino's water utility.

That's especially important now as the region wrestles with widespread water pollution problems that have threatened the drinking water source of more than half a million Inland Empire residents.

As hard as Bryden and his staff work to make the colorful report with more than two dozen charts understandable, he admits that reading about "di-ethyl-methyl bad stuff" can make the eyes glaze over.

For those whose knowledge of chemistry is limited to knowing that H₂O is water, a good consumer confidence report will explain the alphabet soup of water regulation and the possible health effects of the often unpronounceable polysyllabic chemicals.

It's still difficult to decipher for San Bernardino resident Tameeca Griffin.

"I look at it, but it's not really in plain language. They say it's safe," she said. "I don't know. I don't know the difference between one contaminant and another."

The annual budget just for water testing in the city of San Bernardino is \$750,000. More than 5,000 samples a year are taken from the city's 54 water wells and analyzed for numerous regulated and unregulated chemicals.

The more ordinary pollutants can carry higher health threats than the industrial pollutants that have gotten so much recent publicity.

Whereas the industrial chemicals may cause health problems for a person decades from now, nitrates interfere with the transmission of oxygen and can cause "blue-baby syndrome" in infants younger than 6 months.

The highest amount allowable in water is 45 parts per million, and the highest reading in San Bernardino was 38. In Colton it was 40.

The chemical most in the news lately still has no mandatory limit in water. Perchlorate, a rocket fuel ingredient, is known to affect the thyroid, and it seems the more scientists look at it, the less they want to see it in the water.

The state lowered its "action level" for perchlorate this year from 18 parts per billion to 4, the lowest level at which it can be detected. The action level simply means that local governments must be notified if levels are detected at that level, and there is no requirement to shut down a well that exceeds that.

The state expects to set a standard, called a maximum contaminant level, or MCL in the lingo of water folks, in early 2004.

Even though it's not regulated, at least it must be reported.

Perchlorate has been a major problem in Redlands, with the chemical traveling west in the groundwater from a former rocket fuel plant in Mentone.

Look at Redlands' report card under additional monitoring and it shows that levels up to 5.2 parts per billion were detected in the

system in 2001, but the average is only 0.46 parts per billion.

San Bernardino doesn't have a perchlorate problem but apparently perchlorate seeped into its water at some point because its 2001 report shows the highest reading detected during the year of 6.8 parts per billion.

"We only got two wells with perchlorate a couple of times," Bryden said.

Colton, which has shut down wells because of perchlorate thought to be migrating from north Rialto, reported a 7.8 as its highest reading in 2001 with an average of less than 5.

Hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium 6, was the chemical villain in the movie "Erin Brockovich." It is unregulated, and though it's dangerous if inhaled, its effect on the body when consumed in water is still the subject of scientific debate.

San Bernardino reports its highest chromium 6 reading of the year to be 4.3 parts per billion, but the average is near zero.

But lead, which is regulated and known to be dangerous, isn't included in San Bernardino's report because it wasn't detected in any water samples, Bryden said.

And many of San Bernardino's wells are in the midst of a huge plume of contamination by the common industrial cleaning solvents, trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene (PCE).

But all of that water is carefully treated before delivery to remove the chemicals. For PCE the maximum allowed is 5 parts per billion, and the city reports a high reading of 4.9. TCE also is limited to 5 parts per billion, and its highest reading was 1.1.

And the rules are getting more strict, with up to 15 new chemicals a year that could be added to the list of things the water department must test for.

"It used to be if it was wet, and you could pump it, you could drink it," Bryden said. "We're really preoccupied with water quality."